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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001416

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/03/2017

TAGS: PHUM PGOV TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: MURDERS OF CHRISTIANS IN MALATYA:

ABERRATION OR PART OF A LARGER PATTERN?

REF: ADANA 56

Classified By: Principal Officer Eric Green for reasons 1.4(b),(d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Malatya residents are still trying to make sense of the brutal April 18 slaying of three Christians by a group of young men. The prosecutor told us he has not yet found any evidence that the killers were acting with outside support or inspiration, though some believe dark forces similar to those implicated in the killing of journalist Hrant Dink are responsible for the crime. Observers are also questioning whether Malatya's volatile ethnic and religious mix contributed to the atmosphere of intolerance, which has driven nearly all western Christians to leave the city in the wake of the murders. Malatya's unique qualities notwithstanding, these killings follow a pattern that appears to apply across the country. If nationalism continues to ratchet up, pumping up those who see diversity as a threat, it may only be a matter of time before other minorities are targeted. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On April 18, five men, aged 19-20, tied up and slit the throats of three Christians (two Turks and one German citizen) in the offices of a religious publishing house in Malatya, a city of about 400,000 in the eastern Anatolian highlands (reftel). The culprits were apprehended trying to escape. On May 30-31, Adana Principal Officer visited Malatya and met with local officials, the widow of one of the victims and representatives of non-governmental organizations.

The Investigation

¶3. (C) Both the governor, Halil Dasoz, and the chief provincial prosecutor, Mustafa Demirdag, clearly recognized that the state's conduct of the case will be scrutinized closely by the international community. The governor emphasized that the police have interviewed over 60 people, based on leads gleaned from the cell phone records of the culprits caught at the scene. Demirdag noted that, given the crime's importance, he has assigned one of his deputies plus two prosecutors to the case; normally murder cases are given a single prosecutor. He echoed the governor in saying they are searching for evidence of additional accomplices, but that nothing has materialized thus far.

¶4. (C) Demirdag said that, since the men had acted as a group, the case will be heard by the "heavy" criminal court and the prosecution could use terrorism statutes to impose harsher penalties. (There is little doubt that some or all of the five arrested at the scene will be convicted.) The

alleged ringleader, Emre Gunaydin, was initially in critical condition due to injuries suffered trying to flee the building. He is now recovering, alleviating the fear that all the blame would conveniently fall on a dead suspect.

Malatya's Christian Community

¶15. (C) Remarkably, Suzanna Geske, the German victim's widow, is determined to stay in Malatya. "We have lived in Turkey for ten years. This is home," she told us. Her three children are attending local schools and are not reporting any harassment. In contrast, the widow of one of the Turkish victims has left Malatya in part because her child was being taunted for her beliefs. Geske noted that, as foreigners, her children are expected to be Christians, but Turks are suspicious of their Muslim compatriots who convert. Geske fought a successful battle with the local authorities to have her husband buried in Malatya (space was eventually secured in the Armenian cemetery). Her next goal is to gain Turkish citizenship so that her children can remain in school legally and to reduce the amount of red tape she faces for routine necessities such as opening a bank account.

¶16. (C) Most of the other dozen or so western Christians are leaving Malatya for Ankara. One British man elected to leave when, about a week after the murders, a news article published his address, the names of his children and their pictures. That leaves Geske and 10-20 Turkish Christians, who also face isolation and occasional threats. An American Christian who is also moving to Ankara, Ryan Keating, told us that most of his acquaintances had shown sympathy in the wake of the killings, but friends have also told him that many in the city privately approved of the murders.

ANKARA 00001416 002 OF 002

Why Hear? Why Now?

¶17. (C) Malatya residents are asking themselves two related questions: Were the murders part of a thought-out plot designed to send a political message or the independent work of a group of misguided fanatics? And, is Malatya unique in spawning such a crime, or is it representative of broader trends across Turkey? The authorities, as noted, say they are methodically investigating all leads in the case, but have not found an organized conspiracy such as was apparently behind the Dink killing. Keating said he was not persuaded there was a complex plot behind the killings, noting that violent, intolerant ideas are not hard to find in Malatya and the young men could easily have been inspired by conversations in a teahouse. The culprits reportedly lived in a dormitory where religious and ultra-nationalist groups are active.

¶18. (C) The dormitory, Suzanna Geske believes, is key to what she sees as a wider plot involving a businessman who paid the young men's room and board and indoctrinated them in extremist thinking. Senel Karatas head of the local Human Rights Association, is convinced that forces protected by the so-called "deep state" are complicit in this crime, likening it to the Dink killing and the 2006 Trabzon murder of Antonio Santoro, a Catholic priest. Perhaps seeking to discourage speculation about conspiracies while simultaneously deflecting blame from Malatya itself, the governor stressed that the boys were migrants from outlying provinces, at the same time noting that no evidence has yet indicated a wider plot.

¶19. (C) Karatas also lamented Malatya's intolerant atmosphere, which in her view had deteriorated significantly in recent years as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) have grown stronger. She stressed that most AKP supporters reject fanaticism but that a small group within the party accept and even encourage extremism. She said that religious intolerance extends even to secular democrats, many of whom implicitly blamed the Christian victims by saying that "they shouldn't have been

engaged in these activities in Malatya." A march in Malatya to protest the crime only drew about 300 participants, Karatas said, while about 3,000 joined one organized following the Dink assassination. She characterized the Dink case as about politics (free speech and democracy) but this was about religious freedom, which has fewer defenders.

Comment: Malatya is Unique - Yet All Too Common

¶10. (C) The question of whether Malatya's unique qualities somehow gave rise to the rabid intolerance that animated the killers is useful in teasing out the city's social history: the one-time presence of a large Armenian community (Hrant Dink was born there) and the current mixture of Turks and Kurds practicing both Sunni Islam and Alevism. But these characteristics pertain in many Turkish cities which, over the centuries, have experienced periods of peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic and religious groups, punctuated by horrific outbursts of violence.

Malatya's recent history of both religious and nationalist extremism, with regional variations, are evident in most parts of Turkey. One repercussion is that, outside of a handful of large cities such as Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara, Christians in Turkey feel at best unwelcome and subject to suspicion (proselytizing is legal but many Turks frown on it and assume the Christians' goal is to convert them) and at worst subject to violent hostility. If extreme nationalism continues to gain traction, it may just be a matter of time before extremists who view diversity as a threat to Turkey take aim at more minority groups members. End comment.

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